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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000159

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SUBJECT: REFERENDUM UPDATE - ONE WEEK OUT

REF: CARACAS 000135

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

¶1. (C) Summary: With just over a week to go before the February 15 constitutional referendum to remove official term limits, credible local polling indicates that support for President Chavez's "Yes" campaign has drawn slightly ahead of the "No." The Government of Bolivar in Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) continues to dedicate significant state resources to promote a "Ye" victory. Political tensions remain high with two attacks on religious institutions in Caracas in less than a week and Chavez's ongoing tirade of belligerent, polarizing claims that Venezuela will dissolve into chaos if the "No" vote wins. Local analysts believe the outcome of the referendum will be determined by which side is better able to mobilize its voters to the polls and whether or not non-aligned voters, Venezuela's least motivated potential voters, participate in the election. So far, President Chavez appears to have been successful in reframing the referendum on indefinite reelection as a plebiscite on preserving popular government social programs and domestic peace. End Summary.

POLLS SHOW "YES" SLIGHTLY AHEAD

¶2. (C) Datanalisis' Luis Vicente Leon told Polloffs February 4 that his unpublished polling from January indicates that the "Yes" vote is slightly ahead, but within the margin of error of his poll. He attributed the growth in support for the "Yes" since December to Chavez's success in convincing his base that the referendum is about other issues -- protecting the social missions and preventing civil war. Chavez's radical tactics have reduced his popularity slightly, as support for the amendment has increased. Leon contended that the relative level of abstentionism on either side is both impossible to determine from polling and is likely to be the decisive factor in the outcome. Among those polled who were the most confident in their intention to vote, they favored "Yes" over "No" by 11 percent. Leon acknowledged that about two-thirds of independent "ni-ni" voters do not favor the amendment, but that they are the group least likely to show up to vote on February 15.

¶3. (C) Leon said he has not conducted recent enough polling to know what the impact of the mass student protests has been (data collection for his last poll ended on January 18), but he opined that their influence has most likely diminished somewhat since they first took to the streets to protest the

closure of independent RCTV media outlet in 2007. Leon also suggested that because of the expansion of the amendment's language to remove term limits for all officials, not just the presidency, local pro-government leaders are more motivated to work for a "Yes" victory. He also said some opposition leaders may not be quite so committed to its defeat. Leon also echoed opposition claims that they lack the resources to challenge Chavez's state-funded "Yes" campaign.

CHAVEZ WARNS AGAINST ABSTENTIONISM

14. (SBU) Chavez announced February 5 that the "true" poll will be taken on February 15, and he warned his supporters not to become over-confident by recent polls which show the "Yes" slightly ahead of the "No." A February 2 poll conducted by Felix Seijas' Institute of Venezuelan Data Analysis (IVAD) showed the "Yes" ahead with 48 percent to the "No" vote's 47 percent. Chavez contended February 2 in an interview with Spanish-language CNN that -- although he will win on February 15 -- there is no limit to how many times he can propose an amendment. He added that he could, in theory, propose the amendment again this year if "the people insist and it complies with legal mandates." He also mentioned that he could also call a new constituent assembly to draft an entirely new constitution. Nevertheless, Chavez said that if he loses, he will simply step down in 2012.

15. (SBU) In his February 1 "The Lines of Chavez" column -- run in a variety of newspapers nationwide -- the Venezuelan President wrote that his supporters had conducted a test run of his proposed voter mobilization "commands" to combat voter abstention. Their goal is to share information among

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Chavista grassroots groups in each state and who in turn are tasked with rounding up voters to ensure as many "Yes" votes as possible. Chavez concluded that around 90 percent of the "command centers" for this effort had been activated. He went on to warn that the failure of the referendum would "open the sinister doors of the past."

PAPAL NUNCIO ATTACKED

16. (SBU) The Venezuelan Conference of Bishops (CEV) announced February 4 at a press conference that Chavez's amendment proposal is creating "social tension" that threatens the country's stability. CEV President and Maracaibo Archbishop Ubaldo Santana publicly criticized the GBRV for prioritizing the amendment over more pressing social concerns that plague Venezuelans. He also contended that the CEV had received complaints from public workers and social mission beneficiaries who were being compelled to campaign and vote for the "Yes." Santana also strongly rejected the January 31 attack on the Caracas synagogue (Reftel).

17. (SBU) Later the same day, security cameras recorded motorcyclists throwing four tear gas canisters at the Embassy of the Holy See in Caracas. Two of the canisters fell close to the exterior of the building and there was no reported damage. Holy See diplomats publicly urged the GBRV to "guarantee the security of a diplomatic mission." This most recent tear gas attack, the second on the Holy See Mission in Caracas this year, follows the January 30-31 overnight attack on Caracas' oldest synagogue (Reftel). Venezuela's Catholic Conference of Bishops condemned the synagogue attack in the CEV's February 4 press conference.

SOFTBALL FOR "SI"

18. (SBU) State media covered an exhibition January 31 night softball game between a "Yes" team of GBRV senior leaders teamed up with famous Venezuelan baseball players and members of the Venezuelan women's Olympic softball team. President Chavez played first base with the olympians, while Infrastructure Minister Diosdado Cabello and Tax Authority (SENIAT) Director Jose David Cabello headlined the red-uniformed "Yes" team. Former Cincinnati Reds star David Concepcion, as well as Chicago White Sox slugger Magglio Ordonez, Detroit Tigers infielder Carlos Guillen, and New York Met relief pitcher Francisco ("K-Rod") Rodriguez, also played for the "Yes" team. Ordonez is featured prominently in "Yes" TV and radio spots. The exhibition game was played at a stadium inside Fort Tiuna in Caracas before a small crowd. Chavez and the women's softball team won 4-1 in five innings.

COMMENT

19. (C) President Chavez appears to have been successful in reframing the issue on the February 15 ballot as a contest over the survival of his revolution and its accompanying social benefits rather than a plebiscite to allow indefinite reelection. The weeks of highly-publicized incidents of minor violence and unrest appear to be working in the Venezuelan president's favor by convincing undecided voters that the devil they know is better than an uncertain future. University students remain at the forefront of "No" efforts, eclipsing financially strapped and more cautious opposition political parties. Political parties and university students plan to march together on February 7 in Caracas in what will be a serious late-game test of the opposition's mobilization capacity. Chavez's comment to CNN that he can re-run an amendment referendum as many times as he chooses is also probably demoralizing to the "No" camp.
CAULFIELD